

cerned with. 3. What about the Whisky Rebellion? 4. Mr. Goodman assumes the existence of some kind of "decentralized functional politics," as an alternative to the concern of the common man with the federal government. If he means anything other than the local self-government about which a great deal has been written, what does he mean? Why assume that such a spontaneous political life went on? Why is it not possible to describe the essential state of the non-voters as substantial political apathy, encouraged by a long stretch of prosperity after 1787?

In the modern perspective, characterized so much by a fearful preoccupation with the centralized and omniscient state, the affairs of this early period seem relatively anarchic. They also seem pretty attractive. That this period was one of the high points in the history of the free man and of the estimable ideal of live-and-let-live, I have little doubt.

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Mr. Goodman's conjecture embodies one significant insight and two important misinterpretations. He has perceived that the government of early America—that is, the method through which political power was exercised—was not simple. Rather it operated on several levels and through a variety of agencies. The main streams of American historiography have never given adequate weight to this factor because their attention has been focused entirely upon the national government; the majority of historians who have treated politics have written in terms of a succession of presidents. That is why political history has been quite sterile in this country. It is well to be reminded that the most important acts of government, those which had the most direct and most effective influence upon the life of the people and upon the structure of society, were exercised through "decentralized" political forms.

However, I cannot see that this amounted to anarchism or even quasi-anarchism. These forms proliferated not because people—at any social level—distrusted or were indifferent to government, but rather because they wanted a great deal of government. In the inter-constitutional period (1774-1788), the most authentic popular voices are those which call for an end to the state of nature and the beginning of "a State of well regulated Society," complete with "a fundamental Constitution securing . . . sacred Rights & Immunities against all Tyrants that may spring up." (See my *Commonwealth*, Ch. I) There was by no means indifference to government as such, although the affairs of the federal government often did seem remote from the interests of the great masses of people. (I think Goodman takes too literally the statement from Beard on property qualifications. The reference was to the period just before the break with England, and the Revolution changed a good deal. In any case, the property qualification—in a society of small farmers and artisans—did not of itself exclude a great many people.)

Finally, I am not sure whether the structuring of government and of attitude toward government in this period can really be termed pluralistic. I agree there were several levels on which power was exercised. But there was a willingness, on the part of some groups at least, to ascribe paramount authority to one level of government. The various decentralized political forms were not really autonomous, independent of each other. The town, the county, the parish, each had a life and function of its own. But the state could create such agencies, and destroy them at will. To that extent power was more hierarchically than pluralistically distributed. However, there was, at the time, no unanimity of opinion on this question; and the divisions over it may have been significant. It is certainly a question that merits further investigation.

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The Life and Thoughts of Simone Weil

SIMONE PETREMENT

Editor's Note: Simone Weil is familiar to the readers of POLITICS from her several essays published here: Reflections on War (Feb. 1945), The Iliad (Nov. 1945), Words and War (Mar. 1946), Factory (Dec. 1946). Mlle. Petrement's essay is translated by Lionel Abel. It is reprinted, with permission, from "Critique" No. 28, 1948, and is, in part, a review of a collection of aphorisms from Simone Weil's notebooks recently published by Plon under the title: "La Pesanteur et la Grace."

The interested reader is also referred to the collection of letters by and reminiscences about Simone Weil which appeared in "Cahiers du Sud" (No. 284, 1947), and to the excellent study by Aime Patri in "La Table Ronde" (February, 1948).

IT is with misgiving that one resolves to speak of this book, for it has no need of us, while we may well fear that what we can say will prove inadequate. It is a work of a grandeur that is uncommon, and perhaps unique today, a religious work, not because it deals with religious questions, but because its beauty is inseparable from strength and purity of soul. It elevates us and saves us

during such times as we are concerned with it, but only by lifting us to a point at which we cannot long remain. Since it takes us so far out of ourselves, we should recognize that we have little chance of assimilating to our own level, or of properly discussing it in our own terms. Not that this work is inhuman, for surely one feels the troubles and griefs of the human condition to the degree that one resists them and rises above them. But Simone Weil resists them with such unconquerable energy, and seems to see them from so far off, that the effect is frightening. To have known her does not help us much to understand her; on the contrary, the knowledge we have of her could very well lead us astray, since it gives a feeling of familiarity with a genius about whom so much is still not known. We ought to be more on guard than others, since, limited to the same means of understanding, we might imagine ourselves provided with better ones. Much effort and close attention will be necessary, and if we are to arrive at her thought, we shall have to rely almost entirely on what she wrote, very rarely on what she said in conversation, and then only when we are sure that we recall exactly the words she used. Her life instructs, it is true, and in such a way as to better prepare one to understand her work.

1.

Her life instructs, as much as a human life can, and with a light blinding to our frailties. Almost all lives are ambiguous, confused, subject to more than one interpretation; hers is terribly distinct and pure, not only in its actions, but also in the complete liberty (or the purely internal necessity) by which just these acts were chosen. The daughter of a Parisian doctor, a graduate of the *Ecole normale supérieure*, where she took her degree in philosophy, she was certainly never compelled to cast her lot with those who bear the weight of others. But the choice she made, in complete freedom, of not being separated from them, and of not defending them only by words—an acceptable career, that—but of sharing their hardships, this choice is evident in every detail of her life. As soon as she began to teach—this was at Puy, in 1931—she profoundly affected all in contact with her, eliciting the admiration and friendship of her students and scandalizing the bourgeoisie of the town by going along with strikers who demonstrated before the mayor's office. It was like this throughout her short career as a professor. While devoting herself passionately to her work, she was a militant in the unions, spoke and acted fearlessly and uncompromisingly, was regarded as a communist by many, and as a trotskyst by the communists; the fact is that she never supported either party. In 1934, obeying a sense of obligation that took precedence over every other inclination, she stopped teaching to take a job in a factory, and despite her poor health remained at this job for the whole period she had decided on. Some time after this she took part in the Spanish Civil War, on the Republican side, without hope, and without enthusiasm for the way the war was being conducted, but simply in order not to be spared its dangers; her parents found her in a Spanish hospital, wounded as a result of some accident, poorly cared for, and in a condition which worsened daily.

In June of 1940 she was in Paris, and despite the love she felt for her parents, and they for her, she refused to leave with them until Paris was declared an open city. She followed her parents to Marseilles, and there she decided, freely, not compelled by circumstances, to become an agricultural worker for a while. She had wanted to do this long before, and doubtless she now felt that her time was short. In 1942 she left for America with her parents, expecting, after this detour, to reach England and participate in the war. She had to go to England alone; her parents were not permitted to follow her. Her request that she be parachuted to French soil was turned down, but as she restricted herself to eating very little, having in mind all the time the hunger of the peoples of Europe, she died of exhaustion in an English hospital in 1943.

It must be added that her whole life had been saintly. She gave herself freely, never taking into account her time, her money, her weariness, her knowledge. She was always in the most difficult spot. Obstinate when it came to defending others, she often could not bear to defend herself. For example she was unwilling to send a protest to the Vichy Ministry about the non-payment of her salary. When she saw an opportunity to save not only the life, but also the dignity, the humanity of someone, she scarcely noted whether the means to so doing involved risk to her own person. In Italy she gave her confidence to a stranger, not

a fascist, but politically shaky and in want, and who had informed her that the fascists would pay well any one who informed on an anti-fascist. Perfectly well aware of the risk she was running, but hoping that by overcoming temptation he would recover his lost dignity, she confided to him that she had fought in Spain. He was equal to the test, and did not denounce her.

From the beginning of the war she led an ascetic life, sleeping on the ground, eating very little, certainly eating less than her official rations allowed when she was in Marseilles, for she gave half of her allotments to the political prisoners in a nearby camp, and she refused to buy on the black market. This asceticism—so strange to us—was not at all arbitrary. Not only were the needs of others greater then, but the war itself elicited such conduct from the noble soul of one who wanted to share to the utmost a frightful misfortune. One cannot recall a single circumstance of her life in which she had not shown herself pure, tender, courageous, and absolutely generous.

It is not unreasonable to pay special attention to the words of those whose lives are saintly. There is only one wisdom, the same wisdom that makes one live rightly, makes one think clearly. Since we have lost this heroic and incorruptible lass, who was at the same time so reasonable, there is not much chance that we can find a better guide than the words she left us. But even if one left her life out of account, her work would be well-nigh indispensable. For the problems she had raised courageously and tried to solve, with the necessary science, intelligence and integrity, are perhaps the most important and difficult that we confront. What some lack to solve these problems is science, but what most lack is complete honesty of thought; she had both. In politics and on questions of social organization and work, as in philosophy and in religious reflection, she developed a powerful and original line of thought; there is no need to look at her life to perceive that. Moreover, she was able to combine various fields, and in an epoch in which there is no lack of specialists, but in which there are few indeed who are able to see the various fields as a whole—so that a thinker may be reasonable on details and yet childish and illogical when it comes to understanding the whole—in such an epoch, a mind that is powerful enough to see the whole is just what we need.

2.

There is little about politics in this book, and the few things one finds do little more than suggest her profound criticisms of Marxism and her own positive doctrine; these are known to very few. However, the fragments touching on politics are far from negligible. Moreover, one cannot pass by politics without a word when speaking of Simone Weil, for her lucidity in this domain is one of the main supports of her philosophy. She herself remarks in this book that “to contemplate the social is as valid a way as to withdraw from the world,” and thus she was not wrong “to keep close to politics for so long a time.” By contemplating the social she was able to recognize what makes for the most shameful abjectness; it is neither poverty nor suffering, but the sway of force over the mind. One is so afraid of force that one does not even strive to protect one's idea of the good; one is convinced of having been mistaken, that the good was not good, since it was not vic-